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18 April 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Implications of a Direct Telephone Link Between the  
Kremlin and the White House

1. The establishment of a direct telephonic link between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev is one proposal advanced as a means to avert war arising from weapons accidents to misinterpretations of alert actions on either side. It would provide a way to explain accidents and to dispel critical uncertainties rapidly and authoritatively. This memorandum discusses the proposal in terms of its feasibility and effectiveness for its intended purpose, in terms of other purposes to which it might be put, and in terms of its broad political implications.

2. The most conspicuous way in which a top-level link could reduce the chances of war by accident would be by providing the opportunity for quick notification of the other side in the unlikely case that a missile or bomber ever escaped control and headed toward the opponents' territory. There might be time,

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in such a case, to relay this information to the other side, which would probably accept the explanation on the grounds that leading off with a single weapon, and giving warning, was an improbable attack strategy. The other side would thus be given the preferable option of alert rather than pre-emption in panic.

3. A direct communications link could, under some circumstances, provide a means for clarifying a situation in which warning indications were ambiguous and raised questions of the possibility of an enemy attack. For example, if either party felt it necessary in such a case to undertake alert actions which could be subject to misinterpretation it could convey directly assurances of its defensive intent. In most circumstances, the problem of winning credibility for such assurances would be difficult, since the communication could obviously be used to further deception. Nevertheless, we believe there might be circumstances in which, assuming that both sides genuinely wished to avoid war, such a communication might contribute to arresting further provocative actions on either side and thus providing time for regular diplomatic action.

4. There are, however, several limitations on the feasibility of such a measure. A major limitation would be time.

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It would not always be possible for one leader to reach the other instantaneously. Not only would there be problems of physical availability in the capital cities, but there are complications in security of communications ties, and language interpretation. It would also often be the case that one leader could not instantly explain specific actions of his side which had alarmed the other, but only give generalized assurances of peaceful intentions.

5. One of the principal disadvantages and even dangers in such a link would be its susceptibility to political maneuver, especially in times of tension. There would be a common interest in seeking clarifications of warning indicators to avoid war. But in times of crisis one or both sides frequently keep their ultimate intentions deliberately ambiguous. There is, in short, a premium on bluffing, and neither side is likely to give up this option, or be persuaded that the other has given it up, so long as the present level of mistrust continues. A direct link might lead one side, in a time of tension, to demand clarifications which the other would not wish to make. Thus, in times of high political tension the link in many cases would not serve its intended purpose; indeed, it might be a source of greater, rather than lessened, misunderstanding and risk.

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6. Perhaps even more important than its intended purpose, a communications link would have considerable political significance. It would mark a dramatic and unprecedented step. Khrushchev would probably favor the idea, especially for its contribution to the prestige of his country and of himself. He also would see uses to which he could put the measure. If such a link were established, he would probably be tempted to use it for political conversations. He might also try to use it as an instrument of pressure by calling every time that an RB-47 flew near the USSR or a large-scale SAC bomber exercise occurred, in order to get the US to restrict its activities.

7. Political reverberations from the establishment of such a link would stir both the Communist and Western alliances. Intelligence on the Sino-Soviet dispute during 1959 and 1960 makes very clear that Chinese suspicions of Soviet detente and high-level direct relations with the US were a major cause of discord. The Chinese Communists would probably be highly suspicious of a direct Moscow-Washington tie (it is doubtful if one of this sort exists even between Khrushchev and Mao), and frictions in Sino-Soviet relations would be exacerbated.

8. In the West, some of our allies -- especially Adenauer and DeGaulle -- would probably be ill-disposed toward the idea.

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In their view, it might lead to increasing bilateral US-USSR decision-making on matters which they deem to be subject to NATO decision. DeGaulle, like the Chinese, might also be concerned over the dramatic implicit reaffirmation of the unique great power status of the US and the USSR.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES



Abbot Smith  
Acting Chairman

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